

MACOMB COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

PERTUSSIS (WHOOING COUGH) INFORMATION SHEET

What is pertussis?

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is a contagious respiratory illness caused by a bacteria.

Who can get pertussis?

Pertussis is often thought of as a childhood disease. However, older children, adolescents, and adults can also get pertussis.

What are the symptoms?

The early symptoms are like those of an ordinary cold but they do not improve after a few days. Nasal discharge thickens and the coughing becomes more severe until it occurs continuously in bouts up to a minute long. At the end of each bout, as the child gasps for breath, he or she makes a “whooping” noise that gives the illness its name. Severe coughing lasts for 2-10 weeks. Less severe coughing persists for several months. Symptoms in older children and adults are much less severe with no “whoop”.

How long after exposure do symptoms first begin?

Symptoms usually begin 7-20 days after exposure.

How is it spread?

The illness is spread through the air by direct contact with respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing.

How long is a person contagious?

Persons with pertussis are contagious from the time of symptom onset to 3 weeks after the onset of severe bouts of coughing.

Are there complications?

Pertussis can lead to pneumonia. Bouts of coughing can cause bursting of blood vessels in the brain and a lack of oxygen to the brain, which can cause brain damage and even death.

Is there treatment for pertussis?

Antibiotics given when symptoms first begin may lessen the severity of the illness. However, after bouts of severe coughing have begun, antibiotics do not have much affect on the duration or severity of the illness.

How can pertussis be prevented?

- Pertussis can be prevented by vaccination. Infants should be vaccinated with diphtheria, tetanus, and acellular pertussis (DTaP) vaccine at 2, 4, 6, and 15-18 months of age with an additional dose at 4-6 years of age.
- The antibiotic, erythromycin, should also be given for 14 days to persons who have had household or other close contact with a person with pertussis.